PublicEye

By Cara DeGette

Diversity for some at Air Academy High

Here is a peculiar story about what happens when you ask School District 20 bureaucrats about a student club designed to celebrate diversity — except for when diversity involves gays and lesbians — at Air Academy High School.

First, meet **Sara Horton**. She is one of many brave students at Air Academy in northern Colorado Springs, a school where the vast majority of students are white and middle- to upper-class. Horton belongs to her school's **Diversity Club**, a group of 10 to 15 students who regularly meet to talk about the rich and often complex mosaic of man- and womankind.

The Diversity Club, formerly called Helping Other People Excel (HOPE), is one of 32 student organizations recognized by the school as an "official" club. That means students can meet during regular class time, use the school's public address system to advertise upcoming meetings and events, freely post promotional posters — and enjoy the feeling that comes with being acknowledged as belonging to a *legitimate* group.

"She tells me what I can and cannot say."

— Mike Sibley, Air Academy High's dean of students

Horton is also a founding member of Air Academy's **Gay-Straight Alliance** — which is decidedly *not* an officially sanctioned club. The GSA, which meets weekly during lunchtime, is one of six student groups that cannot use the public address system or enjoy other benefits that come with being blessed by school officials.

For what it's worth, nearly twice as many students have been attending meetings of the GSA, which just formed this school year, than those of the Diversity Club. Horton chalks that up to the fact that the subject matter is so topical. "By far, more people are concerned about gay issues than celebrating their diversity," she says.

And here's the rub: Though it would seem evident that diversity and gays and lesbians go hand-in-glove, District 20 bureaucrats reject that notion, without reservation. Here are the levels of absurdity to which they are willing to stoop to stake their claim:

Last month, members of the Diversity Club attended the annual State High School Diversity Conference at Cherry Creek High School in Englewood. Air Academy officials allowed the students to go to the Saturday event with an important caveat: They had to promise they would not attend any panel discussions that even touched on the topic of gays and lesbians.

In less than two weeks, starting on April 3, the Diversity Club is sponsoring the school's annual Diversity Week. One day, the kids will bring in different ethnic foods to share; on another, a panel discussion will feature students talking about various cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Other scheduled events will incorporate hugs and drum circles and a film about African children living in war zones.

One topic that won't come up — and that, in fact, has been expressly *prohibited* from being discussed — is, you guessed it, anything having to do with gays and lesbians.

"It seems weird to me," Horton says. "We're a club that is supposed to support diversity. Homosexuality is a major point of life these days. Sooner or later, everyone has to deal with it. It just seems a little ridiculous."

That sounds jarringly like the message expressed over in District 11, another Colorado Springs school district. Last year, bureaucrats there were so fraught with fear over the potential for public controversy that they similarly attempted to relegate a Gay-Straight Alliance at Palmer High School to second-tier status. A lawsuit and nearly a half-million dollars later, D-11 eventually backed down, agreeing to recognize the club.

A phone call to Air Academy High School officials was in order. Reached last Friday, the school's dean of students, **Mike Sibley**, immediately asked whether I had gotten "clearance" to interview him from the school district's public information officer, **Nanette Anderson**. "She tells me what I can and cannot say," Sibley said.

Once such "clearance" was subsequently obtained, Sibley confirmed that the school's Diversity Club is officially recognized; the Gay-Straight Alliance is not. The distinction — and this is where it gets a bit murky — is that diversity issues are part of the school's curriculum, but gay and lesbian issues are not.

"It is a curricular club doing a curricular purpose," said Sibley of the Diversity Club. "They have to follow what is in our curriculum."

Deciphering this explanation was a bit complicated, so I tried another question: Is the issue of homosexuality ever discussed at Air Academy, or is it prohibited? Sibley responded with this: "There is no curricula taught in regard to that."

Frankly, I still wasn't tracking, and when Sibley started talking about how this topic was a "building-level issue," I politely asked him what *that* meant. Just as cordially, he replied, "I'm going to stop our conversation now." He wanted the opportunity, he said, to confer with his principal and other administrators.

Four hours later, Anderson, the district's spokeswoman, sent an unsolicited, three-paragraph e-mail "response." Her gist was that "alternative lifestyles and gay and lesbian issues are not part of the curriculum at [Air Academy]" and, therefore, the students cannot talk about those issues in an officially sanctioned forum.

Not to be outdone, school principal **Erik Fredell** sent a "special delivery" e-mail on Monday to "Kadets and Kadet Supporters" (in reference to the school's mascot), alerting them that this newspaper was planning to write about the Diversity Club's upcoming weeklong series of events. The principal's message read like a cryptogram: "The reporter questioned our administration's decision to deny a specific activity that the host curriculum club had asked to present."

Desperate to sift through the codespeak, we found Air Academy's Statement of Core Beliefs, published right on the school's Web site. Neither the principal nor the dean of students had alluded to these core beliefs when discussing their school's policies and current practices. And with good reason. These are three of the seven:

- "Individual differences, non-traditional learning modes, and creativity will be valued."
- "Our school will be safe; nevertheless, conflict will occur and be addressed by dialogue."
- "We are role models for students, and what we do is more important than what we say."

In light of their current *modus operandi*, administrators might want to amend that last one. Something along the lines of: Do as we say, not as we do.

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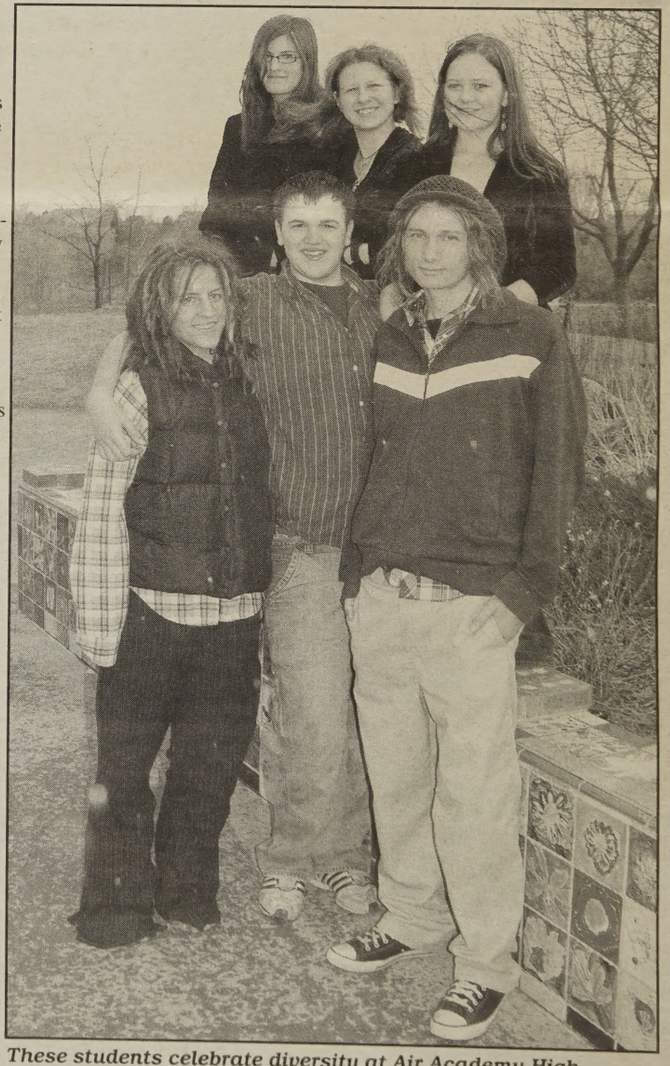

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These students celebrate diversity at Air Academy High School. Top row, left to right: senior Samantha Bainbridge, senior Stephanie Dlimar and junior Kellie Clark. Bottom row, left to right: junior Sara Horton, junior Brenden McHenry and senior Chris Rowland.

CODE PINK

SCRUBBING AWAY THE PRETTY FACE OF MARY KAY

By Grace Hood

Mary Kay entered my life one morning at the gym.

I was running on a treadmill when I noticed a black Mary Kay binder sitting on the machine next to me. I leaned over to initiate a conversation with my neighbor.

"Are you a Mary Kay consultant?" I asked.

In less than 20 minutes, my new friend Janet had given me a catalog, a brochure about Mary Kay job opportunities and an instructional DVD. Janet also asked for my number and left knowing when she could reach me for a follow-up conversation.

The night before my gym meeting, I had been talking to my friend Pam about my fascination with Mary Kay. I knew the cosmetics company was started in the 1960s, but I was curious about how their attitudes toward beauty and makeup may have changed to embrace the modern world. According to the Mary Kay Web site, 1.3 million women worldwide are actively working as beauty consultants for the company.

Having recently returned from a romance writers' convention that took place in a building shared by 2,000 Mary Kay consultants, Pam offered some intriguing insights.

Unlike the romance novelists, the Mary Kay consultants weren't allowed to drink at the hotel bar and only wore knee-length skirts during the convention, she told me. Conservative dress and prohibition don't exactly invoke the image of today's "modern" women — at least not the ones I know.

Mary Kay claims to stand for women, economic self-empowerment and families. But it's also spawned at least one support group with more than 900 members, who decry what they call manipulative tactics and "God abuse." Asked for comment, company officials had not responded by press time.

I set out on a mission to investigate the Mary Kay stereotypes and to get a behind-the-scenes look at the organization. I accepted invitations to a private beauty consultation, a regional meeting and a local weekly meeting. As it turns out, there's a whole lot more at stake than a pink Cadillac.

STARTER UP

The last place I thought I'd reconnect with Bob Marley's "Stir it Up" was during my first Mary Kay beauty consultation. My reference point for Marley comes from late-night dorm-room hangouts in college. This Thursday afternoon, the setting is different: I'm sitting at a table in the basement of my consultant's home, giving myself a hand treatment.

It's been a long, long time, yeah! (Stir it, stir it, stir it together)

Since I got you on my mind. (Ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh oh-oh!)

Janet asks me how my hands feel after I've applied the product.

"My hands do feel softer," I say. "They smell really good, too."

"Just imagine what it can do when you apply it to your face," she responds.

Janet invited me to her at-home Mary Kay studio to learn more about job opportunities. If all goes well today, I will become a Mary Kay beauty consultant. Standing between me and my goal is $100. I don't have it. Most Mary Kay beauty consultants enter the business with a $100 starter kit, Janet says. The kit includes samples of skin-care products and makeup I can use on potential customers.

Janet and I engage in idle chatter while I wash the products from my hand.

"I just love satellite radio. This is my favorite mix station," she says in an upbeat tone. Indeed, Marley, the Indigo Girls and Edie Brickell drifting through the room eases what would otherwise be an awkward meeting between two strangers.

Janet next introduces me to skin foundation, something I've never worn before. After quick deliberation, she decides my Mary Kay color is 104. I take the taupe-looking 104 from a Styrofoam tray and apply it to the top of my hand. For contrast, Janet adds an equally taupe-looking 204 foundation to the tray.

"It's a tough call," she says, deliberating.

The florescent lighting in the basement doesn't help the decision-making process. Under the artificial light, the pink-and-white Mary Kay perfume and makeup boxes on shelves to my left look lackluster. A 1-foot-tall Mary Kay doll in the corner, tilted to her left side in a small glass case, looks even duller.

"Hold your hand up to your cheek," Janet tells me.

I hold my right hand next to two lines of foundation I drew earlier on my cheek. Shifting my weight around, I try to find different angles with the light that might unlock this unsolved mystery.

"Nope, you're a 204," she says confidently. "Don't you think?"

"I think you're right," I say.

I'm still not sure, but I anxiously move toward the sink under the vanity to remove the foundation.

After returning to the table, I come back to the topic of the $100 starter kit.

"The job opportunity sounds good. I'm interested. I just don't have $100," I say,